“Our literal lives are at stake!”: Students, teachers and parents back striking students in Oakland, California

Our reporters
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More than 1,200 students in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in Northern California, are engaged in an indefinite strike against unsafe in-person learning amid the present Omicron surge. Striking Oakland students are joining a growing wave of opposition among students and teachers across the US and internationally to a policy of mass infection.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers and students in the district and throughout the West Coast region who expressed their support for the Oakland students.

“I’m out here today to stand with students and teachers because right now it’s not safe,” explained José, a sixth grade math and science teacher at United for Success Academy (UFSA) in Oakland who was striking in sympathy with students on Tuesday. Of roughly one dozen teachers at UFSA, five were quarantining yesterday due to suspected or confirmed COVID-19 exposure or infection. All non-quarantining teachers participated in the strike and the picket line, alongside several additional staff.

Noting the rampant spread of COVID-19 and the preventive measures taken by parents to keep their children safe, José continued, “Only about a third of the students in some of my classes have been in this week. That makes it really hard to teach and hard to learn.”

José continued, “It’s not sustainable. For the first week, we didn’t even do any academic work. It was all like, ‘How are you feeling? How are you doing? What would you like to see things looking like moving forward, to feel good and nourished?’

“It sometimes feels like we’re almost subbing. We can’t really dive into the lessons that we’re supposed to be diving into because there aren’t enough students.

“There is a small percentage of students trying to do online, but it’s been very difficult, and it’s hard for everyone to access.”

José highlighted students’ central need for a safe environment as an essential part of the learning process. “Once you feel supported, the rest comes into place. If you don’t have that, it’s almost impossible to get to that level.”

He agreed with the *World Socialist Web Site’s* call for an elimination strategy, to end community transmission of COVID-19. “Yeah, I think anybody considering a holistic approach would agree with that. We should definitely come together and figure out how to do that.”

According to the district’s COVID-19 dashboard, there has been an ongoing surge of cases since schools reopened from winter break. Over 1,700 cases among students and 260 cases among staff have been reported since January 3. Due to the lack of testing and contact tracing in OUSD as well as loosened COVID-19 safety guidelines for quarantining and isolation of infected staff and students, these numbers are undoubtedly far higher.

The surge taking place in the Oakland public schools mirrors the mass infection taking place among children across the country as schools have been forced to open in recent weeks. According to the latest report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), nearly 1 million US children were infected with COVID-19 just last week.

Jazmine, a teacher at UFSA who struck Tuesday in support of the Oakland students, spoke of the level of infection at her school site. “A lot of my students are not in class now because they are either sick with

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COVID, their parents are sick with COVID, or they are scared to go in-person."

When asked her thoughts on the mental health impact on children and efforts by the Democrats and unions to keep students in school even if they get COVID-19, Jazmine said, "Kids are already experiencing mental health problems right here on the ground, when they see half of their peers out of class. It's like an apocalyptic experience looking around and being like, 'Where are all my peers?' and 'Am I going to get sick next?'"

The district has continued to implement policies that will result in further infections in schools and community spread. On Tuesday, OUSD announced that it will enforce recently updated Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) testing, quarantine and isolation protocols for students and staff in K-12 schools.

According to the district, vaccinated children may remain on campus if exposed to COVID-19, unvaccinated children who have been exposed may return to campus after only five days quarantine and a negative rapid test, and at-home tests will be allowed to clear students early from isolation and quarantine. Additionally, for students below fifth grade, the district will implement a test-to-stay program, which knowingly allows unvaccinated students who have been exposed to stay on campus for a "modified quarantine."

These guidelines, fully endorsed by the Biden administration, follow an open policy of mass infection and are designed to keep schools open, regardless of infection or exposure.

Timothy, a high school student from the East Bay, opposed the policies being used to keep open the schools and sent his support to striking Oakland students. "Schools across the country are opening amidst the government's disastrous decision to abandon all pandemic protections. Millions have been diagnosed in the past few days. Amidst these atrocious circumstances, it is incredibly inspiring to see grassroots protests of students standing in solidarity with their teachers in defiance of the capitalist agenda."

Doug a retired truck driver in the Seattle area, said, "There is no excuse for the germ warfare being waged on the working class by the financial elites. Thank you, Oakland students, for taking a stand and showing us the way out of this horrible pandemic."

Alison, a parent of a Los Angeles Unified student, tweeted a statement of support Wednesday, urging students elsewhere to take up a fight as well. "As a parent of young children, I fully support these Oakland students' opposition to unsafe schools and unscientific policies of mass infection across the US. Getting Long COVID is not inevitable. I encourage kids locally at Los Angeles Unified School District to do the same."

Chris, a worker in Napa County, said, "I wholeheartedly support the actions and intentions of the students of the Oakland Unified Student Strike. These students represent the best and most sensible among us and are giving this crisis the urgency it deserves. I not only support them and their actions but call upon those with authority to enact the necessary measures to ensure the public safety to do so. Our literal lives are at stake!"

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